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# **Independence and Interdependence in the Writing Center**

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## **Abstract**

The writing center should be a space where we, as tutors, promote both independence and interdependence. We should strive to help students improve their skills, so they have the confidence to move forward with their paper and future papers on their own. We should also encourage interdependence through collaboration with the writing center. Students can benefit from their tutor offering unique perspectives and a place where the writer can talk through their ideas. Tutors need to be available to meet students' individual needs by offering a balance between our focuses on self-sufficiency and collaboration.

## **Key Words**

Self-sufficiency, Autonomy, Independence, Interdependence, Collaboration, Writing Center, Tutoring, Writing, Resource

## **Independence and Interdependence in the Writing Center**

The writing center serves many different purposes to the students who utilize it, with two of its largest goals being to promote self-sufficiency and collaboration. Promoting self-sufficiency helps students learn and apply new skills to develop their independence as writers. This self-sufficiency is necessary to develop confidence in one's writing styles and abilities. But, expecting complete independence from any writer, regardless of experience, is neither realistic nor helpful. This is why writing centers are also a space of collaboration, which gives students a sounding-board to help them work through their ideas and questions and see different perspectives on their writing. Whatever stage in the process the writer is in, and whatever role they need us to play, we will be there to meet their needs. In the writing center, we should promote independence and interdependence, where students can both learn to rely on their own knowledge of writing and have a space where they can still receive the collaboration that remains necessary to both confidence and a polished finished product.

Helping students develop new skills and confidence by teaching them the skills they need can be very empowering for them. As stated on the Utah State University Writing Center's website, tutors specialize in "building on writers' strengths and empowering them to express their ideas," as well as "facilitating growth and development throughout all stages of the writing process" (Utah State University). Both of these goals, when achieved, will inevitably lead to less of a reliance on the writing center for assistance in the writing process, as well as more self-sufficiency for the writer. At the surface level, this self-sufficiency is a good thing. In an article titled, "Writing and Self-Regulation: Cases from the Self-Regulated Strategy Development Model," Steve Graham et. al say, "An important goal in writing instruction for students who find writing and learning challenging... is to help them incorporate additional self-regulatory

processes into their writing, so that they can become more goal oriented, resourceful, and reflective” (Graham et. al, 1998). In other words, when students develop the ability to regulate their own learning, they become more proactive in gaining knowledge and putting their thoughts down on paper. As writing center tutors, we help facilitate this self-sufficiency by helping students develop and understand writing skills and strategies that they can then begin to use on their own.

However, this focus on self-sufficiency should not detract from the reason we are here: to be a resource for students. In their book, *Realizing Autonomy*, Peter Cassidy et. al highlight the importance of promoting interdependence along with autonomy. They say, “The central objective of writing centers in general is to create better writers through self-awareness.” However, not all writers are going to come to the writing center seeking this autonomy (Cassidy et. al, 2012). Many writers seeking assistance from a tutor do not want to simply be sent on their way with our feedback. Instead, they need the opportunity to collaborate with someone who is looking at their paper and ideas for the first time. This perspective brings up the importance of interdependence in addition to autonomy. Rather than trying to develop writers who no longer need our help, we want to remain a resource students feel comfortable returning to again and again. Even experienced writers do not have a perfect knowledge of every writing strategy or grammar rule. Writing is not simply right or wrong. Because there are many ways to go about it, learning every detail about what makes good or bad writing is impossible. We can never declare ourselves or the writers we help completely “self-sufficient,” since there will always be new things for us to learn. We still need to be there to help maintain the confidence the student has developed and continue to offer our own unique perspectives and knowledge on writing strategies.

This focus on interdependence highlights the second purpose of the writing center: collaboration. The Online Writing Centers Association (OWCA) says, “Tending to interdependence in online writing center work can reveal how centers do not so much fix writers as orient them toward writing as a social act” (OWCA, 2021). We want to promote the idea that effective writing requires effective collaboration. No matter how knowledgeable someone may be in writing, they will still benefit from a second pair of eyes looking at their paper. Oftentimes, a student will have spent so much time looking at their paper that they can no longer see it from an objective point of view. That is where the writing center comes in. Tutors are in a unique position where we can look at students’ writing for the very first time tell them how their ideas and writing styles are perceived by an outside reader. Collaboration also involves being a sounding-board as students talk through their ideas. In addition to autonomy, Cassidy et. al discuss the importance of developing “an environment that [offers] the freedom to explore ideas” (Cassidy et. al, 2012). I have met with many students who come into a meeting feeling overwhelmed and unsure of where to go with their paper. Throughout the appointment, I let them do most of the talking. I point them towards main ideas in their paper and ask them questions about what they are trying to get across to the reader. By the end of the appointment, these students often feel a lot better about their writing, simply because they were able to talk about their ideas, hear my input, and discover which things were most important for them to focus on.

This idea of collaboration, though necessary, can be difficult for writers who are not used to sharing their writing and accepting feedback. As tutors, we should keep students’ tendencies to seek perfection and avoid vulnerability in mind and provide writers the encouragement and validation that they need. I sympathize with students like this, as I am still working on developing confidence in my own writing and skills. Self-sufficiency is important to me in all

areas of life, especially when it comes to my writing. I have always struggled with the idea of being vulnerable enough to let people see my work and offer advice before it is perfect in my eyes. This has only ever led to frustration, as the level of “perfection” I seek is unreachable without considering the view of an outside reader. No matter how good somebody is at writing, they can always benefit from feedback. Writing projects often become so familiar to the writer, that it becomes difficult to notice errors, readability issues, spots where more information is needed, etc. Working with others, such as writing center tutors, can help to solidify the ideas the writer already has a firm grasp on by offering another point of view. Tutors should keep students’ vulnerability in mind and treat works with care and respect while reminding students that collaboration is an essential step in the writing process. We should focus on encouragement and students’ concerns as they take steps towards accepting other points of view on their writing.

In order for the writing center to best meet each individual student’s needs, tutors need to find a balance between our focuses on self-sufficiency and collaboration. We need to be able to meet the student wherever they are in the writing process and give them the writing center experience that will be most beneficial to them. We also need to ensure that we emphasize the importance of continued collaboration, no matter how skilled an individual may be in writing. We need to encourage all writers – no matter their experience – to come to us for whatever assistance they may need.

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